

3 Goals and Philosophies of High School Writing Centers

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High school writing centers tend, out of necessity, to be pragmatic institutions. Their offerings and facilities are often determined by such practicalities as the available space or the timing of the director's free periods—not by carefully researched and developed philosophies. Stephen North's assessment of the proliferation of college writing centers is even more appropriate to the centers in high schools:

The speed of this growth, unfortunately, has enabled writing center staffs to do little more than survive, to do what they can to improve the lot of the writers in their charge, leaving precious little time, money, or energy for research into the hows and whys of their operations. (North 1984, 25)

As late arrivals in high schools that already suffer from decreased funding for established programs, writing centers face a continual struggle for their very existence; as a result, writing centers may fail to fulfill many of their original philosophical objectives. One center, for instance, has been operating informally in a planning stage since 1982, without ever becoming an official part of the school system.

Nevertheless, the very existence and growth in number of high school writing centers at the national level indicate that a certain philosophy is at work. This philosophy is largely the same whether a center is staffed by students, like most of those discussed in this article, or by teachers. Both types of centers assist individuals at various stages of the writing process in a low-risk environment. Those with peer tutors also promote certain relationships among students; those staffed by teachers model informal relationships between adolescents and adults. In any case, the spread of both types of writing centers suggests that, although the centers may be competing for limited resources within school districts, they do fit into certain institutional goals.

Current literature on writing centers, such as Gary Olson's collection of articles, *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration* (1984), or Steward's and Croft's excellent practical work, *The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods* (1982), discusses writing center philosophies primarily in student terms and concentrates on college centers. Olson's collection of articles, for instance, deals with cognitive skill development and audience awareness. Yet institutional objectives, which are critical, often receive short shrift. A writing center director, especially in a high school, ignores institutional goals at his or her own peril. When a center is constantly fighting for survival, it must be able to justify itself regularly, not only as it affects small groups, but also as it affects the structure of the entire school. Realism (and politics) takes precedence over idealism on this point; supervisors and administrators tend to think in global terms.

Institutional and writing center objectives both include providing individual assistance for under-represented populations. These populations vary from school to school: they may include advanced placement students, ESL students, remedial students, or so-called average or regular students who are neglected because the proverbial squeaky wheel gets the grease. At Scarsdale High School, the writing center's greatest successes have been with students from such groups. We have helped tenth-grade honors students with their research papers—who says honors students never need help?—and we have scheduled weekly meetings with several ESL students. For one Korean student, a year's work in the writing center included opportunities to converse as well as to write. His tutor was excited by his progress:

He used to be very quiet and shy. Over the months, he has become more open and talkative. We talk about various things, such as the senior class play, SATs, etc. He talks openly to me now without the reserve he used to have. We have been writing papers for social studies. . . .

At Scarsdale, the writing center has also attracted a number of students from regular level classes who want a little extra help or encouragement with their writing. Unlike some other writing centers, ours has seen few remedial students—and this has been important. We are aware that students often stigmatize remedial facilities; and we want to avoid a situation in which we attract so many remedial students that others perceive the center as a facility available only to them. Similarly, James Upton of Burlington (Iowa) Community High School has discussed the importance of making a writing center a place for *all* students:

We also changed the name of the proposed center to avoid the often unfair connotation of a writing lab as a place where lower ability or "dumb" students were sent to catch up.

At the same time, however, to the extent that a center may offer remediation, it can also help fill a second important institutional goal, especially in states with required competency tests. A writing center can offer tutorial assistance for students who need to pass such exams in order to graduate.

Districts with writing-across-the-curriculum programs benefit from writing centers, too, because the centers deal with writing in all disciplines. In addition, writing centers may encourage students to publish and distribute their work, whether they have written poetry, scientific studies, or interviews with other students. Thus, the existence of a writing center is proof of the importance placed on writing skills by a school district.

On a less academic level, writing centers that employ peer tutors can model certain relationships among students that administrators might well wish to foster. First, by offering peer tutoring, writing centers can reach students who are not comfortable with adults; the setting poses few risks for such youngsters. Second, such centers promote collaborative, noncompetitive relationships among students; instead of challenging each other for grades, students in a writing center help each other. This goal may be especially important in districts with a high percentage of college-bound students, where the pressure to excel may be intense. A tutor from Scarsdale was particularly positive about the personal rewards of tutoring:

The most rewarding activity in which I participate is the Writing Center. . . . My work in the Writing Center offers me not only the satisfaction of helping others, but also an opportunity to enrich myself academically and emotionally.

Last but not least, a writing center, as a primarily student-operated concern, is relatively inexpensive for a school district. Although many centers have sophisticated equipment, including computers, tape recorders, and filmstrip projectors, others contain only the most basic necessities: tables, chairs, paper, a dictionary, a thesaurus. In a time of tight school budgets, a crucial part of a writing center's philosophy may indeed be to provide assistance and enrichment in writing at the lowest possible cost.

The goals discussed thus far have been practical and institutionally oriented. But the philosophy of a writing center as it affects students is also important, for the center can benefit both tutors and their student clients.

Tutors learn about the writing process by intervening frequently in the writing of others. At the very least, most of the tutors are competent writers, students who have learned the advantages of working through various stages of the writing process. But the common notion that a skill is fully mastered only when one has to teach it holds true. As Harriet Marcus (1984, 66) has stated in an *English Journal* article, "We believe that in teaching others, we learn best and we hoped our peer tutors' involvement in the center would improve their already competent writing as they gained awareness about writing and themselves." As an observer removed from the piece of writing, a tutor can see why a revision or an extended brainstorming session can help. In addition, tutors learn about the variations in individual writing processes.

Two of the most essential skills for tutors are careful listening and critical reading. In the writing center, both abilities must be developed. Tutors are expected to read or hear drafts of essays, and they must immediately respond to the compositions. The editing skills that tutors gain in these situations are ultimately useful with their own writing.

Working in a writing center helps tutors not only with their own writing (and their college applications), but also with their interpersonal skills. The tutors at Scarsdale, for instance, have to work with everyone from reluctant remedial students to timid freshmen, from touchy advanced placement candidates to non-English-speaking youngsters. By observing someone's difficulties and by collaborating with students from various groups within the school, tutors gain respect for the diversity of others. In her journal, one of my students, who was successful academically and socially, recorded her experience with a troubled ninth grader. On one of the ninth grader's first visits, the tutor noted:

[This student] came to the center with no books, paper or pen. She had no idea why she was there. I explained to her my position in helping her, what the center does, what we will be doing in the sessions, etc. She seemed totally uninterested and like it was a waste of time. I can honestly say that I am not looking forward to helping her with her bad attitude. But I am going to try as hard as I can to spark some interest and enthusiasm in her and hopefully help her. We'll see!

After a more successful session three weeks later, in which the ninth grader was able to write and revise a paragraph, the tutor commented that both girls felt more satisfied:

She left pretty happy, knowing that now she didn't have to do the assignment at home. I thought the session went well and that we got a lot accomplished.

Tutoring in difficult situations, such as the preceding one, also gives tutors more empathy for their own teachers. One senior kept commiserating with the teacher of a particularly difficult class!

Writing center work provides tutors with a final, very important advantage—self-confidence. Often, tutors are able students academically, but may not be “stars” in the social or athletic worlds of their peers. At the writing center, they not only receive attention and assistance from the director, but also gain the respect and admiration of fellow students. One tutor recounted the end of a session with a junior:

I gave him some solid assistance, but he came up with much of it [an introduction] himself with my prodding. He left exclaiming, “That’s amazing. You’re a senior, right?” He obviously felt confident and appreciative—and *I* felt *AWESOME!*

The exhilaration of the tutor and the other student in this case reminds us that the tutors are not the only students who benefit from the collaborative setting of a writing center. Like the tutors, students will gain a heightened sense of the writing process given time and a place to work through assignments step-by-step with another person. And although, ideally, classroom teachers provide such assistance, in reality, they are often unable to do so. Steward and Croft address this goal of writing centers in their section on philosophy:

A philosophical commitment to individualization through conference teaching is the one tenet fundamental to all of the most successful writing laboratories that we have surveyed. This belief means also the commitment to process, for laboratories can emphasize the writing process as classrooms, no matter how organized, seldom can. (1982, 5)

This point is even truer in high schools than in colleges because a teacher in a high school may be instructing over one hundred students in composition, in addition to having lunchroom duty, study hall, and sundry other chores.

Moreover, precisely because tutors are *not* classroom teachers, they often can step back and encourage their peers to apply what they have learned. That is, rather than correcting or fixing errors, a good tutor will show a student how to make changes. Thus the clients of writing centers will learn how to think and edit independently, in preparation for college essay writing. Cognitive development is promoted as writing skills are enhanced.

It is also important for students to have an audience for their work before it is graded. Students may be encouraged to take risks with their writing and to see that criticism need not be a purely negative

activity. As students watch and hear others react to their writing, they gain a stronger sense of audience; as they hear tutors relate their own experiences with similar writing problems, they develop an awareness that they are part of a community of writers. Finally, students achieve a necessary realization that “it can be done”—by talking to peer tutors, they learn that the assignments which give them heartaches or anxiety have been survived by others.

Although many of the same experiences may be found in centers staffed by teachers or other adult professionals, such centers have their own advantages, too. First, students may develop closer relationships with adults in the informal setting of the writing center; they may be less defensive about criticism when it is offered in a low-risk setting with no grades involved. In addition, as students who work with tutors see adults struggling, for example, with phrasing or organization, they realize that writing is a common endeavor and a difficult task for everyone. Students understand that their problems with writing are not a mark of their stupidity or incompetence but a normal, even predictable, circumstance.

In addition to sharing a number of common goals, individual writing centers, whether staffed by adults or students, also have specific aims appropriate to their schools’ needs. Some writing centers, such as the one at Red Bank Regional High School, in Little Silver, New Jersey, work extensively with word processing. The center has a library of software to help students with the writing process and their writing skills, and students may come in to work on papers alone as well as with tutors. The same writing center also keeps a file of competitions. In Scarsdale, where a number of students seek help with research papers, we have found it necessary for tutors to have expertise in methods of documentation and a familiarity with library resources. In contrast, the center at Mount Markham Senior High School in West Winfield, New York, has worked with students in danger of failing. The particular goals of writing centers are as different as their schools, although one variation exists in several districts—writing centers serve as a liaison between a district and a local college. Students at Red Bank Regional High School work closely with and train with students from Monmouth College. This association contributes to the tutors’ sense of professionalism and gives the college a heightened presence in the community.

Varied as writing center goals and philosophical tenets may be, the director of a writing center must remember the most fundamental point—a good writing center will have as its philosophy living up to its name. It will aim at making writing central in the school and in

students' lives by involving students and adults in a collaborative approach to writing. A writing center will foster a positive attitude toward writing and encourage students to feel more confident about engaging in the essentially human act of communication.

References

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Other quotations come from surveys of writing center directors conducted by Pamela Farrell and from tutor reports and journals from the Scarsdale High School Writing Center, 1985-86. The seven tutors that year, all of whom were instrumental in developing the writing center's philosophy, were Wendy Brenner, Beverly Brown, David Ephron, Jolie Goldstein, James Kikkawa, Nicolas Meyer, and Andrew Schmolka.